



ZIONIST NATIONALIST MYTH OF ENFORCED EXILE

Israel deliberately forgets its history

An Israeli historian suggests the diaspora was the consequence, not of the expulsion of the Hebrews from Palestine, but of proselytising across north Africa, southern Europe and the Middle East

BY SCHLOMO SAND



EVERY Israeli knows that he or she is the direct and exclusive descendant of a Jewish people which has existed since it received the Torah (1) in Sinai. According to this myth, the Jews escaped from Egypt and settled in the Promised Land, where they built the glorious kingdom of David and Solomon, which subsequently split into the kingdoms of Judah and Israel. They experienced two exiles: after the destruction of the first temple, in the 6th century BC, and of the second temple, in 70 AD.

Two thousand years of wandering brought the Jews to Yemen, Morocco, Spain, Germany, Poland and deep into Russia. But, the story goes, they always managed to preserve blood links between their scattered communities. Their uniqueness was never compromised.

At the end of the 19th century conditions began to favour their return to their ancient homeland. If it had not been for the Nazi genocide, millions of Jews would have fulfilled the dream of 20 centuries and repopulated Eretz Israel, the biblical land of Israel. Palestine, a virgin land, had been waiting for its original inhabitants to return and awaken it. It belonged to the Jews, rather than to an Arab minority that had no history and had arrived there by chance. The wars in which the wandering people reconquered their land were just; the violent opposition of the local population was criminal.

This interpretation of Jewish history was developed as talented, imaginative historians built on surviving fragments of Jewish and Christian religious memory to construct a continuous genealogy for the Jewish people. Judaism's abundant historiography encompasses many different approaches.

But none have ever questioned the basic concepts developed in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Discoveries that might threaten this picture of a linear past were marginalised. The national imperative rejected any contradiction of or deviation from the dominant story. University departments exclusively devoted to “the history of the Jewish people”, as distinct from those teaching what is known in Israel as general history, made a significant contribution to this selective vision. The debate on what constitutes Jewishness has obvious legal implications, but historians ignored it: as far as they are concerned, any descendant of the people forced into exile 2,000 years ago is a Jew.

Nor did these official investigators of the past join the controversy provoked by the “new historians” from the late 1980s. Most of the limited number of participants in this public debate were from other disciplines or non-academic circles: sociologists, orientalist, linguists, geographers, political scientists, literary academics and archaeologists developed new perspectives on the Jewish and Zionist past. Departments of Jewish history remained defensive and conservative, basing themselves on received ideas. While there have been few significant developments in national history over the past 60 years (a situation unlikely to change in the short term), the facts that have emerged face any honest historian with fundamental questions.

Founding myths shaken

Is the Bible a historical text? Writing during the early half of the 19th century, the first modern Jewish historians, such as Isaak Markus Jost (1793-1860) and Leopold Zunz (1794-1886), did not think so. They regarded the Old Testament as a theological work reflecting the beliefs of Jewish religious communities after the destruction of the first temple. It was not until the second half of the century that Heinrich Graetz (1817-91) and others developed a “national” vision of the Bible and transformed Abraham's journey to Canaan, the flight from Egypt and the united kingdom of David and Solomon into an authentic national past. By constant repetition, Zionist historians have subsequently turned these Biblical “truths” into the basis of national education.

But during the 1980s an earthquake shook these founding myths. The discoveries made by the “new archaeology” discredited

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Nor is there any trace or memory of the magnificent kingdom of David and Solomon. Recent discoveries point to the existence, at the time, of two small kingdoms: Israel, the more powerful, and Judah, the future Judea. The general population of Judah did not go into 6th century BC exile: only its political and intellectual elite were forced to settle in Babylon. This decisive encounter with Persian religion gave birth to Jewish monotheism.

Then there is the question of the exile of 70 AD. There has been no real research into this turning point in Jewish history, the cause of the diaspora. And for a simple reason: the Romans never exiled any nation from anywhere on the eastern seaboard of the Mediterranean. Apart from enslaved prisoners, the population of Judea continued to live on their lands, even after the destruction of the second temple. Some converted to Christianity in the 4th century, while the majority embraced Islam during the 7th century Arab conquest.

Most Zionist thinkers were aware of this: Yitzhak Ben Zvi, later president of Israel, and David Ben Gurion, its first prime minister, accepted it as late as 1929, the year of the great Palestinian revolt. Both stated on several occasions that the peasants of Palestine were the descendants of the inhabitants of ancient Judea (2).

Proselytising zeal

But if there was no exile after 70 AD, where did all the Jews who have populated the Mediterranean since antiquity come from? The smokescreen of national historiography hides an astonishing reality. From the Maccabean revolt of the mid-2nd century BC to the Bar Kokhba revolt of the 2nd century AD, Judaism was the most actively proselytising religion. The Judeo-Hellenic Hasmoneans forcibly converted the Idumeans of southern Judea and the Itureans of Galilee and incorporated them into the people of Israel. Judaism spread across the Middle East and round the Mediterranean. The 1st century AD saw the emergence in modern Kurdistan of the Jewish kingdom of Adiabene, just one of many that converted.

The writings of Flavius Josephus are not the only evidence of the proselytising zeal of the Jews. Horace, Seneca, Juvenal and Tacitus were among the Roman writers who feared it. The Mishnah and the Talmud (3) authorised conversion, even if the wise men of the Talmudic tradition expressed reservations in the face of the mounting pressure from Christianity.

Although the early 4th century triumph of Christianity did not mark the end of Jewish expansion, it relegated Jewish proselytism to the margins of the Christian cultural world. During the 5th century, in modern Yemen, a vigorous Jewish kingdom emerged in Himyar, whose descendants preserved their faith through the Islamic conquest and down to the present day. Arab chronicles tell of the existence, during the 7th century, of Judaised Berber tribes; and at the end of the century the legendary Jewish queen Dihya contested the Arab advance into northwest Africa. Jewish Berbers participated in the conquest of the Iberian peninsula and helped establish the unique symbiosis between Jews and Muslims that characterised Hispano-Arabic culture.

The most significant mass conversion occurred in the 8th century, in the massive Khazar kingdom between the Black and Caspian seas. The expansion of Judaism from the Caucasus into modern Ukraine created a multiplicity of communities, many of which retreated from the 13th century Mongol invasions into eastern Europe. There, with Jews from the Slavic lands to the south and from what is now modern Germany, they formed the basis of Yiddish culture (4).

Prism of Zionism

Until about 1960 the complex origins of the Jewish people were more or less reluctantly acknowledged by Zionist historiography. But thereafter they were marginalised and finally erased from Israeli public memory. The Israeli forces who seized Jerusalem in 1967 believed themselves to be the direct descendants of the mythic kingdom of David rather than – God forbid – of Berber warriors or Khazar horsemen. The Jews claimed to constitute a specific ethnic group that had returned to Jerusalem, its capital, from 2,000 years of exile and wandering.

This monolithic, linear edifice is supposed to be supported by biology as well as history. Since the 1970s supposedly scientific research, carried out in Israel, has desperately striven to demonstrate that Jews throughout the world are closely genetically related.

Research into the origins of populations now constitutes a legitimate and popular field in molecular biology and the male Y chromosome has been accorded honoured status in the frenzied search for the unique origin of the “chosen people”. The problem is that this historical fantasy has come to underpin the politics of identity of the state of Israel. By validating an essentialist, ethnocentric definition of Judaism it encourages a segregation that separates Jews from non-Jews – whether Arabs, Russian immigrants or foreign workers.

Sixty years after its foundation, Israel refuses to accept that it should exist for the sake of its citizens. For almost a quarter of the population, who are not regarded as Jews, this is not their state legally. At the same time, Israel presents itself as the homeland of Jews throughout the world, even if these are no longer persecuted refugees, but the full and equal citizens of other countries.

A global ethnocracy invokes the myth of the eternal nation, reconstituted on the land of its ancestors, to justify internal discrimination against its own citizens. It will remain difficult to imagine a new Jewish history while the prism of Zionism continues to fragment everything into an ethnocentric spectrum. But Jews worldwide have always tended to form religious communities, usually by conversion; they cannot be said to share an ethnicity derived from a unique origin and displaced over 20 centuries of wandering.

The development of historiography and the evolution of modernity were consequences of the invention of the nation state, which preoccupied millions during the 19th and 20th centuries. The new millennium has seen these dreams begin to shatter.

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Translated by Donald Hounam

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Shlomo Sand is professor of history at Tel Aviv university and the author of *Comment le peuple juif fut inventé* (Fayard, Paris, 2008)

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- (2) See David Ben Gurion and Yitzhak Ben Zvi, *Eretz Israel in the past and present*, 1918 (in Yiddish), and Jerusalem, 1980 (in Hebrew); Yitzhak Ben Zvi, *Our population in the country*, Executive Committee of the Union for Youth and the Jewish National Fund, Warsaw, 1929 (in Hebrew).
- (3) The Mishnah, regarded as the first work of rabbinic literature, was drawn up around 200 AD. The Talmud is a synthesis of rabbinic discussions on the law, customs and history of the Jews. The Palestinian Talmud was written between the 3rd and 5th centuries; the Babylonian Talmud was compiled at the end of the 5th century.
- (4) Yiddish, spoken by the Jews of eastern Europe, was a Germano-Slavic language incorporating Hebrew words.

TRANSLATIONS

FRANÇAIS **Comment fut inventé le peuple juif**

ESPAÑOL **Cómo se inventó el pueblo judío**

ENGLISH **Israel deliberately forgets its history**

ESPERANTO **Kiel elpensiĝis la juda popolo ?**

فارسی **چگونگی برساختن قوم یهود**

PORTUGUÊS DO BRASIL **A complexa gênese do povo judeu**



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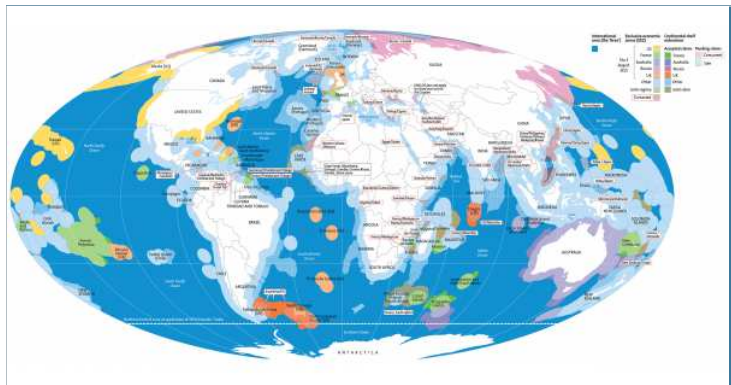
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